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THE CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION
OF LABOR.

THE thirteenth convention of the American Federation of Labor met in Chicago 11th to 19th December 1893. To a student of the labor question, the discussions of these annual meetings are invaluable. The discussions in the convention marked the growth within the last three years of a demand for state activity. Agitation to this end was begun by the Knights of Labor ; but of late, under the name "the new trades-unionism," it has spread much faster in Great Britain than here. American trades unions, however, are now falling into line. Recent court decisions restricting the right to strike upon railroads, recent reductions in wages, and the conduct of many monopolistic combinations of capital are stimulating the movement.

In 1892, at the Philadelphia convention, 51 delegates, representing 1615 votes, declared against, and only 20 delegates, representing 559 votes, favored government ownership of all means of production ; though the majority favored government ownership of railroads. In December 1893, 30 delegates, representing 1253 votes, were opposed to referring this proposition to the "favorable" consideration of the labor organizations represented, and 55 delegates, representing 1182 votes, favored such reference and endorsement. Votes, it should be said, are allowed the trades unions represented in proportion to the number who have paid yearly dues of three cents to the Amalgamated Association ; the large central labor unions or trades and labor assemblies of our cities, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, are allowed only one vote each. There are 81 national and international trade unions in the country, with about 600,000 members. Of these 38 were represented at the December convention. They had paid dues to the American Federation of Labor for about 240,000 members, but have, in fact, a much larger membership. The corresponding figures in 1891 were 29 national and international unions and about 195,000 members ; in 1892, 45 unions and about 225,000 members. There are, however, in affiliation with the amalgamated association some other national unions and many local unions, as well as 15 central bodies of uncertain but large membership ; only part of the membership of these societies is identical with that of the above 38 national trades unions. The 150,000 organized railroad employees are not at all affiliated. Moved in part by the hope that the displacement of

labor in the printing trade by type-setting machinery might be counterbalanced by a growth of the press through cheap, and above all equal, telegraph rates to all papers, whether members of any press association or not, especially emphatic endorsement was given to government ownership of the telegraph.

The action of the convention which is most likely to meet with adverse criticism on the part of economists was the vote, with few dissenting voices, for government issue of \$500,000,000 of greenbacks at the rate of \$20,000,000 a month, to be used in setting the involuntarily idle at work on roads under competent engineers. About 68 boycotts were hastily voted, 27 being on breweries; twenty were against clothing manufacturers, chiefly in Boston, in connection with efforts to break up the sweating system there. Ten boycotts were against theaters. Later it was wisely voted to leave the imposition of these boycotts to the discretion of the executive council after seeking to arrange differences by conciliation. The clever way in which one can urge a boycott when court injunctions seem absolutely to prevent, was illustrated in the annual report of President Gompers, when, in referring to the New York clothing house, he said: "I am constrained to say that in my judgment the firm named is not entitled to more friendship and patronage at the hands of organized labor and its sympathizers than its conduct toward its employees warrants."

Hitherto in every business depression our labor organizations have almost gone to pieces. But, thanks to experience, those unions having high dues and some reserve have not only held their own but even grown a little during 1893, while to a considerable degree holding up wages amid the reductions around them. Difficulties also with the Knights of Labor, which have been so injurious to trades unions in the past, are now, with the decline in the power of the Knights and their growth in wisdom, almost a thing of the past.

The convention was a unit in opposing resort to violence, and even the opposition to the militia, which blazed up at the previous convention because of the action of the troops at the Buffalo and Homestead strikes, was no longer apparent. The effect of recent prohibitory legislation in many states in reference to the use of private armed guards from another state was seen in the absence of even a reference to the Pinkertons, who have apparently ceased to be an issue in the labor movement.

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